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**PEOPLE'S  
HISTORY**  
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OF THE  
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**UNITED  
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"Historians may well view it as a step toward a coherent  
new version of American history."

—Eric Foner, *New York Times Book Review*

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**HOWARD ZINN**

## 18.

### The Impossible Victory: Vietnam

From 1964 to 1972, the wealthiest and most powerful nation in history of the world made a maximum military effort, with short of atomic bombs, to defeat a nationalist revolutionary in a tiny, peasant country—and failed. When the United States in Vietnam, it was organized modern technology versus organize man beings, and the human beings won.

In the course of that war, there developed in the United the greatest antiwar movement the nation had ever experienced a movement that played a critical part in bringing the war to an end.

It was another startling fact of the sixties.

In the fall of 1945 Japan, defeated, was forced to leave Indochina, the former French colony it had occupied at the start of the war. In the meantime, a revolutionary movement had grown there, determined to end colonial control and to achieve a new life for the people of Indochina. Led by a Communist named Ho Chi Minh, the revolutionaries fought against the Japanese, and when they were gone held a great celebration in Hanoi in late 1945, with a million people in the streets and issued a Declaration of Independence. It borrowed from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, in the French Revolution, and from the American Declaration of Independence, and began: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Just as the Americans in 1776 had listed their grievances against the English King, the Vietnamese listed their complaints against French rule:

They have enforced inhuman laws. . . . They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots, they have suppressed uprisings in rivers of blood. They have fettered public opinion. They have robbed us of our rice fields, our mines, our forests, and our natural resources. . . .

They have invented numerous unjustifiable taxes and reduced our people, especially our peasantry, to a state of extreme poverty. . . .  
. . . from the end of last year, to the beginning of this year

than two million of our fellow-citizens died of starvation. . . . The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country.

The U.S. Defense Department study of the Vietnam war, intended to be "top secret" but released to the public by Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo in the famous *Pentagon Papers* case, described Ho Chi Minh's work:

. . . Ho had built the Viet Minh into the only Vietnam-wide political organization capable of effective resistance to either the Japanese or the French. He was the only Vietnamese wartime leader with a national following, and he assured himself wider fealty among the Vietnamese people when in August-September, 1945, he overthrew the Japanese . . . established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and staged receptions for in-coming allied occupation forces. . . . For a few weeks in September, 1945, Vietnam was—for the first and only time in its modern history—free of foreign domination, and united from north to south under Ho Chi Minh. . . .

The Western powers were already at work to change this. England occupied the southern part of Indochina and then turned it back to the French. Nationalist China (this was under Chiang Kai-shek, before the Communist revolution) occupied the northern part of Indochina, and the United States persuaded it to turn that back to the French. As Ho Chi Minh told an American journalist: "We apparently stand quite alone. . . . We shall have to depend on ourselves."

Between October 1945 and February 1946, Ho Chi Minh wrote eight letters to President Truman, reminding him of the self-determination promises of the Atlantic Charter. One of the letters was sent both to Truman and to the United Nations:

I wish to invite attention of your Excellency for strictly humanitarian reasons to following matter. Two million Vietnamese died of starvation during winter of 1944 and spring 1945 because of starvation policy of French who seized and stored until it rotted all available rice. . . . Three-fourths of cultivated land was flooded in summer 1945, which was followed by a severe drought; of normal harvest five-sixths was lost. . . . Many people are starving. . . . Unless great world powers and international relief organizations bring us immediate assistance we face imminent catastrophe. . . .

Truman never replied.

In October of 1946, the French bombarded Haiphong, a port in northern Vietnam, and there began the eight-year war between the

For four days they took command of the ship and its crew, taking amphetamine pills to stay awake until the ship reached Cambodian waters. The Associated Press reported in late 1972, from York, Pennsylvania: "Five antiwar activists were arrested by the state police today for allegedly sabotaging railroad equipment near a factory that makes bomb casings used in the Vietnam war."

Middle-class and professional people unaccustomed to activism began to speak up. In May 1970, the *New York Times* reported from Washington: "1000 'ESTABLISHMENT' LAWYERS JOIN WAR PROTEST." Corporations began to wonder whether the war was going to hurt their long-range business interests; the *Wall Street Journal* began criticizing the continuation of the war.

As the war became more and more unpopular, people in or close to the government began to break out of the circle of assent. The most dramatic instance was the case of Daniel Ellsberg.

Ellsberg was a Harvard-trained economist, a former marine officer, employed by the RAND Corporation, which did special, often secret research for the U.S. government. Ellsberg helped write the Department of Defense history of the war in Vietnam, and then decided to make the top-secret document public, with the aid of his friend, Anthony Russo, a former RAND Corporation man. The two had met in Saigon, where both had been affected, in different experiences, by direct sight of the war, and had become powerfully indignant at what the United States was doing to the people of Vietnam.

Ellsberg and Russo spent night after night, after hours, at a friend's advertising agency, duplicating the 7,000-page document. Then Ellsberg gave copies to various Congressmen and to the *New York Times*. In June 1971 the *Times* began printing selections from what came to be known as the *Pentagon Papers*. It created a national sensation.

The Nixon administration tried to get the Supreme Court to stop further publication, but the Court said this was "prior restraint" of the freedom of the press and thus unconstitutional. The government then indicted Ellsberg and Russo for violating the Espionage Act by releasing classified documents to unauthorized people; they faced long terms in prison if convicted. The judge, however, called off the trial during the jury deliberations, because the Watergate events unfolding at the time, revealed unfair practices by the prosecution.

Ellsberg, by his bold act, had broken with the usual tactic of dissidents inside the government who bided their time and kept their opinions to themselves, hoping for small changes in policy. A colleague urged

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him not to leave the government because there he had "access," saying, "Don't cut yourself off. Don't cut your throat." Ellsberg replied: "Life exists outside the Executive Branch."

The antiwar movement, early in its growth, found a strange, new constituency: priests and nuns of the Catholic Church. Some of them had been aroused by the civil rights movement, others by their experiences in Latin America, where they saw poverty and injustice under governments supported by the United States. In the fall of 1967, Father Philip Berrigan (a Josephite priest who was a veteran of World War II), joined by artist Tom Lewis and friends David Eberhardt and James Mengel, went to the office of a draft board in Baltimore, Maryland, drenched the draft records with blood, and waited to be arrested. They were put on trial and sentenced to prison terms of two to six years.

The following May, Philip Berrigan—out on bail in the Baltimore case—was joined in a second action by his brother Daniel, a Jesuit priest who had visited North Vietnam and seen the effects of U.S. bombing. They and seven other people went into a draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland, removed records, and set them afire outside in the presence of reporters and onlookers. They were convicted and sentenced to prison, and became famous as the "Catonsville Nine." Dan Berrigan wrote a "Meditation" at the time of the Catonsville incident:

Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. . . . We say: killing is disorder, life and gentleness and community and unselfishness is the only order we recognize. For the sake of that order, we risk our liberty, our good name. The time is past when good men can remain silent, when obedience can segregate men from public risk, when the poor can die without defense.

When his appeals had been exhausted, and he was supposed to go to prison, Daniel Berrigan disappeared. While the FBI searched for him, he showed up at an Easter festival at Cornell University, where he had been teaching. With dozens of FBI men looking for him in the crowd, he suddenly appeared on stage. Then the lights went out, he hid inside a giant figure of the Bread and Puppet Theatre which was on stage, was carried out to a truck, and escaped to a nearby farmhouse. He stayed underground for four months, writing poems, issuing statements, giving secret interviews, appearing suddenly in a

on the extensive polling done the polls showed "widespread,

He added (political scientists lishment): "What is startling degree of change in this basic

sed to identify themselves as in 1940, 20 percent of those In 1974, 34 percent called

es were not behaving as usual. Davis, an acknowledged Com- munity on the West Coast. Black d in every way to malign and als. A judge in western Massa- g activist, Sam Lovejoy, who a utility company trying to C., in August 1973, a Superior charged with unlawful entry ur line to protest the bombing

mood of hostility to govern- am war, its 55,000 casualties, iment lies and atrocities. On f the Nixon administration in e one-word label "Watergate," on from the presidency—the ixon in August 1974.

npaign in June of 1972, when photo equipment, were caught he Democratic National Com- plex of Washington, D.C. One

for the Nixon campaign; he ee to Re-elect the President dress book in which was listed nt's address was listed as the rles Colson, who was special

for many years for the CIA. e of the invasion of Cuba in

1961, and three of the Watergate burglars were veterans of the invasion. McCord, as CREEP security man, worked for the chief of CREEP, John Mitchell, the Attorney General of the United States.

Thus, due to an unforeseen arrest by police unaware of the high-level connections of the burglars, information was out to the public before anyone could stop it, linking the burglars to important officials in Nixon's campaign committee, to the CIA, and to Nixon's Attorney General. Mitchell denied any connection with the burglary, and Nixon, in a press conference five days after the event, said "the White House has had no involvement whatever in this particular incident."

What followed the next year, after a grand jury in September indicted the Watergate burglars—plus Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy—was that, one after another, lesser officials of the Nixon administration, fearing prosecution, began to talk. They gave information in judicial proceedings, to a Senate investigating committee, to the press. They implicated not only John Mitchell, but Robert Haldeman and John Erlichman, Nixon's highest White House aides, and finally Richard Nixon himself—in not only the Watergate burglaries, but a whole series of illegal actions against political opponents and antiwar activists. Nixon and his aides lied again and again as they tried to cover up their involvement.

These facts came out in the various testimonies:

1. Attorney General John Mitchell controlled a secret fund of \$350,000 to \$700,000—to be used against the Democratic party—for forging letters, leaking false news items to the press, stealing campaign files.
2. Gulf Oil Corporation, ITT (International Telephone and Telegraph), American Airlines, and other huge American corporations had made illegal contributions, running into millions of dollars, to the Nixon campaign.
3. In September of 1971, shortly after the *New York Times* printed Daniel Ellsberg's copies of the top-secret *Pentagon Papers*, the administration planned and carried out—Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy themselves doing it—the burglary of the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, looking for Ellsberg's records.
4. After the Watergate burglars were caught, Nixon secretly pledged to give them executive clemency if they were imprisoned, and suggested that up to a million dollars be given to them to keep them quiet. In fact, \$450,000 was given to them, on Erlichman's orders.
5. Nixon's nominee for head of the FBI (J. Edgar Hoover had recently died), L. Patrick Gray, revealed that he had turned over the FBI records on its investigation of the Watergate burglary to Nixon's legal assistant, John Dean, and that Attorney General Richard Kleindienst (Mitchell had just

- resigned, saying he wanted to pursue his private life) had ordered him not to discuss Watergate with the Senate Judiciary Committee.
6. Two former members of Nixon's cabinet—John Mitchell and Maurice Stans—were charged with taking \$250,000 from a financier named Robert Vesco in return for his help with a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation of Vesco's activities.
  7. It turned out that certain material had disappeared from FBI files—material from a series of illegal wiretaps ordered by Henry Kissinger, placed on the telephones of four journalists and thirteen government officials—and was in the White House safe of Nixon's adviser John Erlichman.
  8. One of the Watergate burglars, Bernard Barker, told the Senate committee that he had also been involved in a plan to physically attack Daniel Ellsberg while Ellsberg spoke at an antiwar rally in Washington.
  9. A deputy director of the CIA testified that Haldeman and Erlichman told him it was Nixon's wish that the CIA tell the FBI not to pursue its investigation beyond the Watergate burglary.
  10. Almost by accident, a witness told the Senate committee that President Nixon had tapes of all personal conversations and phone conversations at the White House. Nixon at first refused to turn over the tapes, and when he finally did, they had been tampered with: eighteen and a half minutes of one tape had been erased.
  11. In the midst of all this, Nixon's Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, was indicted in Maryland for receiving bribes from Maryland contractors in return for political favors, and resigned from the vice-presidency in October 1973. Nixon appointed Congressman Gerald Ford to take Agnew's place.
  12. Over \$10 million in government money had been used by Nixon on his private homes in San Clemente and Key Biscayne on grounds of "security," and he had illegally taken—with the aid of a bit of forgery—a \$576,000 tax deduction for some of his papers.
  13. It was disclosed that for over a year in 1969–1970 the U.S. had engaged in a secret, massive bombing of Cambodia, which it kept from the American public and even from Congress.

It was a swift and sudden fall. In the November 1972 presidential election, Nixon and Agnew had won 60 percent of the popular vote and carried every state except Massachusetts, defeating an antiwar candidate, Senator George McGovern. By June of 1973 a Gallup poll showed 67 percent of those polled thought Nixon was involved in the Watergate break-in or lied to cover up.

By the fall of 1973 eight different resolutions had been introduced in the House of Representatives for the impeachment of President Nixon. The following year a House committee drew up a bill of impeachment to present it to a full House. Nixon's advisers told him it would pass

the House by the required necessary two-thirds: 8, 1974, Nixon resigned.

Six months before *Review* reported a poll of all had voted for Nixon resign. "Right now, 90% said a vice-president of he did, there was relief i

Gerald Ford, taking mare is over." Newspape liberal or conservative, of the Watergate crisis, "critic of the Vietnam wa The two journalists who Nixon, Carl Bernstein wrote that with Nixon's of this was in a mood o

No respectable Am Julien, editor of *Le Mon nation of Mr. Richard the false values which p that Nixon's Secretary post—in other words, th is to say," Julien wrot General Pinochet in Ch in Paraguay, etc. . . ."*

Months after Julien and Republican leaders assurance to Nixon that proceedings against him Judiciary Committee, s two weeks of televised it would tear the coun *York Times*'s articles t resignation quoted one resigned: "What we wi

When Gerald Ford all of Nixon's policies, from California, Alan